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ABSTRACT

Thirty-three first grade classrooms in Georgia were observed to determine the state of language experience instruction and to examine whether such instruction makes a difference in students' awareness of the reading purpose, their knowledge of instructional terminology, their reading attitudes, and their reading achievement. The Allen Level of Implementation Scale (ALIS) was used to determine the level of implementation of language environment. Students were administered a battery of tests to guage their reading attitudes, reading achievement level, and linguistic awareness. A measure of socioeconomic status was also administered. The findings revealed a general lack of language experience instruction in the classrooms; instead, teachers generally used basal reader guides. Although no significant correlations were found between implementation of language environment and the other variables, socioeconomic status did appear to have an impact on the student sample with the lowest ALIS rating, suggesting that offering first grade students language experiences can deter the effects of socioeconomic status. (FL)

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The Beginner's Concepts About Reading, Attitudes, and Reading Achievement in Relationship to Language Environment

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Abstract

Thirty-three first grade classrooms in three Georgian school systems were observed to determine the state of language experience instruction today and if the implementation level is related to beginners' concepts about reading, attitude, and reading achievement. The Allen Level of Implementation Scale (ALIS) was used to judge the level of implementation of language environment. The student dependent measures were the Linguistic Awareness in Reading Readiness, Heathington Attitude Scale, Metropolitan Achievement Test, SRA Achievement Test, and the Hollingshead Two-Factor Social Index. Kendall zero-order and partial rank correlation coefficients were computed between classroom means on the ALIS and student dependent variables. Findings revealed a general lack of language experience instruction in today's first grade classrooms. Instead teachers were observed to be instructing from basal reader guides. Although statistically significant results were not found between implementation of language environment and student dependent variables, in four of the five partial analyses, socioeconomic status had an impact on the sample with the lowest ALIS rating, but not on the two studies with higher implementation scores. It appears by offering first graders language experiences the effects of socioeconomic status may be deterred.

The Beginner's Concept About Reading, Attitudes, and Reading Achievement in Relationship to Language Environment

Not all children come to school aware of the purpose for reading and with knowledge concerning the terms used in beginning reading instruction. Research has substantiated the fact that many first graders are in a state of "cognitive confusion" (Vernon, 1957) as they confront the reading task and remain in such a state throughout reading instruction (Clay, 1968; Reid, 1966; Mickish, 1974).

The lack of previous contextual reading within the home may account for the initial confusion (Mason, 1980); but what factors contribute to continued misconceptions about reading, even after formal reading instruction? Researchers have begun to postulate as to the causes and to search for instructional methods to clarify the reading process for the beginner (Fitts & Posner, 1967; Bruner, 1971; Elkonin, 1973).

According to Artley (1980), the present preoccupation with skill and subskill development has complicated, rather than clarified, concepts about reading for the child. Because the beginning reader fails to see the relationship between the tasks required during reading instruction and total end-product (reading), confusion is the natural outcome. The instructional terms used by teachers is another confusing situation for the child. At times it is assumed that beginning readers understand terms such as word, letter, sound, first letter, first sound, and sentence without assessing whether this is the case. To clarify the reading process for the beginning reader the most practical approach is one that would stress the meaningful relationship between the oral and written language and make it possible for children to view reading and writing as part of

their own lives. Such an approach is not new. The language experience approach has been emphasized at various times throughout the decades. Even as recent as 1974, Staton's survey made the discovery many teachers were including language experience instruction as one approach to beginning reading. But with the "back to basics" trend and consequent stress on reading skill development, are teachers continuing to offer first graders language experiences?

In order to assess the state of first grade language experience instruction and to examine whether it makes a difference in students' awareness of the reading purpose, knowledge of instructional terminology, reading attitude, and reading achievement, the following study was undertaken.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this investigation was to examine the state of language experience instruction in first grade classrooms. The secondary purpose was to explore the relationship of implementation of language environment to beginning readers' concepts about reading, reading attitude, and reading achievement.

Methodology

Description of Instruments

The instruments in this study included: The Allen Level of Implementation Scale (ALIS) (Allen, 1976); the Linguistic Awareness in Reading Readiness Test (LARR) (Ayers, Downing, & Schaefer, 1977); Heathington Attitude Scale (Heathington, 1975); Hollingshead Two-Factor Social Index (Hollingshead, 1957); and the reading assessments used by

the participating school systems. These were the Metropolitan Achievement Test (Durost, Bixler, Prescott, & Balow, 1970), in Studies 1 and 3; and the SRA Achievement Test (Nasland, Thorpe, & Lefever, 1978) in Study 2.

Allen Level of Implementation Scale (ALIS). Judgement of the level of language implementation of each classroom was ascertained by the use of this observational scale. The ALIS was selected for its representation of the kinds of language experiences hypothesized to clarify the reading process for the beginning reader. The scale has a three strand design that represents the basic framework of the Language Experience Approach (LEA) (Allen, 1976). The scale provides five possible ratings for each of 24 items - eight in each strand. A classroom rating, then, can have an ALIS score of 0 to 96 points, depending on the degree of language experience activity that is evident during observation.

Observer reliability was determined by ALIS ratings of ten classrooms observed twice with a time lapse of one week between observations. The Spearman rank order correlation (Siegel, 1958) between the two total score ratings revealed a high stability measure of .95, which indicated observer reliability using the ALIS.

Linguistic Awareness in Reading Readiness Test (LARR). First grade students' concepts about reading were sampled by three subtests: Recognition of Literacy Behavior (LARR-1), Understanding of Literacy Function (LARR-2), and Technical Language of Literacy (LARR-3). Reliability data were obtained from a representative sample of 333 low, low-middle, and high-middle Canadian Kindergarten pupils. Alternate form reliability data ranged from .62 to .85 for the three subtests. Internal consistency reliability (KR-20) ranged from .84 to .92 at the beginning of kindergarten, and from .76 to .95 at the end of kindergarten. The means, standard

deviations, and item difficulty support the claim that the LARR could be used with students older than kindergarten age.

Heathington Attitude Scale (HAS). In the present study, the HAS was used to assess the reading attitudes of first grade students. Test-retest reliabilities for the primary form with a two-week interval were .73 for 124 students. Item analysis, teacher ratings of positive and negative attitude students, and the interview technique used in developing the original statements provide some validity and internal consistency support for the scale.

Hollingshead Two-Factor Social Index. The socioeconomic rating was used in the present study as a control variable. To measure social class the Hollingshead indices head of household's occupational and educational level. Each index was scaled, differentially weighted, and combined for a total raw score of 11 to 77 points.

Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT). Reliability for the MAT was tested by split-half (odd-even) correlations. Coefficients ranged from .88 to .96. For the five subtests of the Primary I Battery administered at the beginning of Grade 2, the Kuder-Richardson Coefficients ranged from .94 to .97.

SRA Achievement Test (SRA). The internal consistency (KR-20) reliabilities for subtest and composite raw scores ranged from .75 to 1.00. The alternate form reliabilities within a 30 day period were .87 for composite scores and .90 for total scores. Test-retest reliabilities ranged from .78 to .94.

Description of Samples

The study involved thirty three first grade classrooms located in three counties in the state of Georgia. Due to the diversity of populations, each county was designated as a separate study, individually analyzed, and tested for stability across the three samples.

Study 1. Fifteen first grade classrooms (approximately 350 students) located in four elementary schools were the subjects for the first study. The county, largely urban, consists of 116 square miles and has a population of 69,000. Of this population, 20.4 percent is non-white.

Study 2. Eleven first grade classrooms (approximately 275 students) located in one elementary school were the subjects for the second study. The county encompasses 253 square miles. The rural population of 18,000 is 39.8 percent non-white.

Study 3. Seven first grade classrooms (approximately 120 students) located in one school were the subjects for the third study. The rural county has a population of 8,000 and is 37.3 percent non-white.

Procedures

The observational data were gathered during the month of February, 1981 by the investigator. Each classroom was observed during reading instruction for thirty minutes and rated on the ALIS. Student dependent measures were assessed in the following manner:

1. Each classroom teacher, with the aide of the investigator, administered the Heathington Attitude Scale to his/her respective first grade students.

2. The Linguistic Awareness in Reading Readiness Test was administered by the teachers to randomly drawn classrooms to ensure unbiased test scores. First grade classrooms were tested during the time period of 9:00 to 10:30 a.m. Monitors were available to assist in the administration of the LARR.

3. During the month of April, 1981, teachers administered the reading achievement test to his/her respective students. The scores were made available to the investigator as an end of the year reading measure.

4. Socioeconomic data were determined by information in school records and teacher estimation.

Statistical Techniques Employed

Kendall zero-order rank correlation coefficients were initially computed to determine the association of the independent variable, implementation level of language experience environment, to the student dependent variables. The socioeconomic factor was controlled in each of the analyses by Kendall partial correlations (Kendall, 1970). The zero-order correlations were based on classroom ALIS total raw scores and the means on the following dependent variables: (a) recognition of literacy behavior, (b) understanding of literacy function, (c) technical language of literacy, (d) reading attitude, and (e) reading achievement. The socioeconomic class mean was the controlled third variable in the partial rank-order analyses. Significance was established at the .05 level in each of the three studies.

Results

The primary focus of the present study was to obtain information describing the degree to which language experiences were evident in first

grade classrooms today. The second consideration was to examine whether the relationship of level of language experience activity in first grade classrooms is related to student's beginning reading concepts, attitude, and achievement. The reader is cautioned to consider the data as suggestive due to the small sample sizes involved.

As shown in Table 1, the variable ALIS means for the three studies are somewhat skewed. On the average, it appears these three groups of first graders were receiving few language experiences during the initial stages of learning to read. Of course, this is not to imply teachers within each study sample were not offering some meaningful language experience instruction. A study comparison on mean ALIS rating revealed Study 2 ($\bar{x}$ = 17.91) to be considerably ($p<.06$) lower than both Study 1 ($\bar{x}$ = 28.87) and Study 3 ($\bar{x}$ = 24.86). With larger samples, it is believed that significant study differences would have been met.

Insert Table 1 about here

In Table 2 are presented the results of the Kendall zero-order and partial rank correlations for implementation level of language experience environment and students' understanding of concepts about reading (LARR-1, LARR-2, and LARR-3), reading attitude (HAS), and total reading achievement (T-RD).

Insert Table 2 about here

Nonsignificant relationships were revealed between classroom mean ALIS ratings and student mean scores on Recognition of Literacy Behavior (LARR-1), Understanding of Literacy Function (LARR-2), and Technical

Language of Literacy (LARR-3). The one exception is the relationship between ALIS and LARR-3 in Study 3 (Kendall r = .620; ($p < .05$). It should be noted, however, controlling for socioeconomic status consistently resulted in lowered partial coefficients in the sample with the lowest ALIS rating (Study 2; $\bar{x}$ = 17.91). But, Studies 1 and 3 with higher and comparable ALIS ratings, the partial values were essentially the same or slightly larger than the zero-order coefficients. It may be assumed, then, socioeconomic status has a greater influence on the relation between implementation level of language experience environment and students' concepts about reading in classrooms where fewer language experiences are being offered.

The relationship between implementation level of language experience environment and students' attitude and reading achievement was also statistically nonsignificant (see Table 2). As before, lowered partial coefficients resulted in Study 2, but not in Studies 1 and 3 for reading achievement. Again, the lowered coefficients suggest the influence of socioeconomic status on reading achievement in environments lacking language experiences. Partialling out socioeconomic status from the primary association of ALIS and reading attitude (HAS) resulted in increased partial coefficients in the three studies. It appears, then, the relation between implementation of language experience environment and reading attitude is relatively independent of the influence of socioeconomic status.

Discussion

As suggested by this study's finding, there is a general lack of language experience activity and instruction in today's first grade classroom. Durkin (1981a) also found few students involved in language

activities in her sample of third to sixth grade classrooms. It appeared that these first grade teachers were instructing mainly from the basal guide and most of the activities involved skill development. The reliance on the basal guide would suggest few language activities, for in Strand's (1978) basal evaluation it was found that few activities could be classified into one of Roach Van Allen's (1976) three Language Experience Approach strands. As suggested by Durkin (1981b) and supported by the present study's findings, there is a need to evaluate the contents of basal instructional guides and to supplement, if necessary, to ensure that first graders receive meaningful language-related reading instruction.

Since the relationship between concepts about reading and reading achievement has been indicated in previous research (Evans, Taylor, & Blum, 1979; Johns, 1980), the need is apparent to assist beginning readers in acquiring basic concepts about the written language. Researchers and educators have stressed the importance of meaningful reading and writing activities to foster the beginner's understanding of the reading process (Downing, 1979; Doake, 1979). The present study found that language experience instruction may have an impact on first graders' view of reading, for in such an environment the effect of socioeconomic status is deterred. Children entering first grade that have not received many reading related activities in their home environment may profit from a school environment that offers meaningful language experience activities.

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Table 1

Variable Summary Findings by Study

	Study 1 (n = 15)		Study 2 (n = 11)		Study 3 (n = 7)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Allen Level of Implementation Scale (0 - 96)[a]	28.87	12.56	17.91	12.20	24.86	8.09
Socioeconomic Status high low (11 - 77)	45.40	8.06	56.25	5.57	57.65	6.48
Recognizing Literacy Behavior (0 - 22)	15.92	1.11	16.24	1.15	15.46	1.35
Understanding Literacy Function (0 - 20)	11.21	1.48	11.42	1.65	10.85	2.56
Technical Language of Literacy (0 - 29)	21.67	2.31	20.32	2.74	20.32	2.67
Reading Attitude (20 - 100)	78.39	4.35	77.29	3.37	80.16	5.06
Total Reading Achievement	42.21	4.98	43.79	9.94	40.64	7.09
	MAT (2 - 74)		SRA (1 - 99)		MAT (2 - 74)	

[a]Numbers in parentheses indicate the possible score range for each variable.

Table 2

Kendall Zero-Order and Partial Rank Correlations for Classroom Means ($\bar{x}$) on the Allen Level of Implementation Scale (ALIS), Linguistic Awareness in Reading Readiness (LARR-1, LARR-2, LARR-3), Heathington Attitude Scale (HAS), Metropolitan and SRA Total Reading Achievement (T-RD), and Socioeconomic Status (SES)[a]

	Study 1			Study 2			Study 3		
	LARR-1	LARR-2	LARR-3	LARR-1	LARR-2	LARR-3	LARR-1	LARR-2	LARR-3
ALIS									
zero-order	-.116	-.310	-.203	.164	.091	.310	.330	.143	.620*
partial	-.011	-.290	-.183	.144	-.076	.178	.461	.219	.634

	Study 1		Study 2		Study 3	
	HAS	T-RD	HAS	T-PD	HAS	T-RD
ALIS						
zero-order	.106	-.213	-.164	.345	.238	.143
partial	.141	-.161	-.144	.218	.249	.199

Note. Linguistic Awareness in Reading Readiness subtest titles are: Recognizing Literacy Behavior (LARR-1); Understanding Literacy Function (LARR-2); Technical Language of Literacy (LARR-3).

[a]SES is used as a controlled variable.

*$p < .05$